



Philosophizing Alternative Pan-African Media and Society Approaches to Countering Female Violent Extremism in Kenya for Peace and Security

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While women are increasingly playing key roles in terrorist and violent extremist groups in some parts of Africa, little research has been done to highlight the link between women and terrorism. This is true of Kenya, where research has been lacking despite increasing concerns about attacks involving women. For example, a review of two mainstream Kenyan newspapers, *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, highlights several incidents of female involvement in extremism in the country between 2011 and 2016.

It is suspected that women are actively playing a role behind the scenes in support of terror activities in Kenya. It appears that most of the women are indirectly involved in terrorism, mainly through their relationships with extremists. The most prominent examples of this are at least nine reported cases of “jihadi brides” or “al-Shabaab brides.” These are women who are typically radicalized through marriage. There is also at least one recent instance of women fighting on the frontline, the case of three women who attacked a police station in Mombasa on September 11, 2016. The potential threat posed by female violent extremism is very real: Al-Shabaab has already wreaked havoc in Kenya, claiming responsibility for many large-scale attacks over the last few years. This suggests attacks could worsen if female radicalization becomes widespread, as women can “fly under the radar of gender-blind security forces.”¹

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Given the mutating nature and global threat of terrorism, and Kenya's vulnerability to terrorism, there is an urgent need for a better understanding of the role and scope of women's involvement in extremism. A key reason for the lack of knowledge about the link between women and terrorism in Kenya is the fact that terrorism has been perceived and portrayed as a preserve for men, a perception that has been reinforced by the mainstream media, which has usually presented women as victims or bystanders of terror. As a result, government responses to terrorism in Kenya have lacked a gender lens, which has led to missed opportunities to adopt more comprehensive counterterrorism efforts to effectively address the issue of female violent extremism.²

Contextual Overview of Women's Involvement in Violent Extremism in Kenya

While the literature on the phenomenon of female suicide bombing is beginning to take shape in West Africa, that kind of literature has yet to be developed in Kenya, perhaps due to difference in roles and approaches of women in organized terrorism. In West Africa, women—whether coerced or willingly—appear to have taken an active lead as suicide bombers, with young female suicide bombers causing mass casualties in the Boko Haram conflict. While there have not been female suicide bombers in Kenya, media reports indicate that jihadi brides and other radicalized women are aiding and abetting terrorism. News narratives reveal that most of these women were recruited by friends through social media and the internet lured to cross the border into Somalia to join al-Shabaab, before their arrest by Kenyan authorities. The issue of jihadi brides raises important questions, yet little attention has been paid to the gendered norms in society that place men and women in different spaces and reinforce socio-economic, political, and cultural marginalization and how these issues intersect with terrorism.

As terrorism mutates, the focus of counterterrorism is expanding to include addressing the immediate dangers posed by terrorists as well as engaging in strategic prevention, which attempts to deal with the radicalization and recruitment of individuals into terrorist groups. Despite this shift, gender issues are still being left on the periphery. Strategic prevention calls for understanding women as rational actors conscious of their own agency to join terrorist groups, and therein, play active roles as supporters and members who can recruit and execute acts of terrorism, as opposed to just victims.³ A limited application of the gender lens vis-à-vis violent extremism has led national and international actors to miss some of the key elements that fuel violent extremism and the opportunity to adopt more comprehensive counterterrorism efforts.⁴ It is important to localize causes of female violent extremism in order to respond in a multi-dimensional manner, allowing for the application of a gender lens that takes into consideration the differences in social experiences of gender in different contexts and how this interplays with the socio-economic and political factors that cause violent extremism.⁵ If the complexity of gender is appreciated, then an understanding of why young women participate in violent extremism can be safely established.

Kenya's Vulnerability to Terrorism

An Unstable Neighbor

Kenya shares a long, porous border with Somalia, which has endured three and a half decades of instability leading to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Somalis who now live in Kenya as refugees.⁶ For a long time, political elites in Kenya have harbored the view that refugees are the source of terrorism, despite the fact that there are numerous accounts of non-ethnic Somali involvement in violent extremism in the country.⁷ This belief has informed the state's perception of ethnic Somalis and terrorism, and is reflected in state responses, including the latest effort to repatriate Somali refugees by closing the Dadaab refugee camp.

Kenya's Strategic Position

With its central position as a gateway to East and Central Africa and its cosmopolitan and multicultural nature, Nairobi is home to a number of foreign multinationals and international organizations, a major United Nations complex, and a huge number of expatriates. This has made Nairobi attractive to terrorists targeting Western, secular interests. This is evidenced in part by the 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi and attacks on an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa. The latter was masterminded by Kenyan citizens, some of whom were married to local Swahili women from the coast. Since these attacks, Kenya has become increasingly vulnerable to local terrorists, terror networks, and radicalization.⁸ This was accelerated after October 2011 when Kenya launched *Operation Linda Nchi*, a military operation in Somalia that sought to neutralize the threat of al-Shabaab, stabilize Somalia, and avoid a spill-over of instability into Kenya. However the operation drew Kenya into a proxy international war on terror and allowed extremist groups to portray their conflict with Kenya in religious terms, which further fueled radicalization and incited terrorism.⁹ Today, al-Shabaab remains a threat and carries out attacks, especially in the north eastern parts of the country.

Women and Terrorism in Kenya: The Scope of the Problem

A review of two Kenyan newspapers, *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, between 2011 and 2016 revealed a general increase of terrorism after October 2011, the point when Kenya launched *Operation Linda Nchi*. However, the analysis identified only one major instance of women in the frontline of terrorism: the three women who attacked the Mombasa police station on September 11, 2016. In the incident, one of the women was wearing a suicide vest that did not detonate. It is difficult to establish whether this was an isolated case, or the beginning of what could be a trend of attempted female suicide bombings.

This leads to discussions about the emerging roles women play in violent extremism in Kenya as planners, financiers, and recruiters. These roles are beginning to receive public attention due to media coverage, further evidenced in the recent conviction of two Somali women in the United States for financing al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia to organize the Westgate mall attack.¹⁰ These incidences add to the statistics of women's involvement in terrorism, which are embodied by the nine young Kenyan women (jihadi brides) in this study. Analysis of the newspaper articles reveals that these women were mostly recruited by friends who lured them through social networks.¹¹ The women were arrested by Kenyan authorities while trying to sneak into Somalia and were accused of smuggling weapons and explosives into the region, planning attacks, and recruiting others.¹²

Female Violent Extremism in Kenya: Profiling Jihadi Brides

The analytical framework used to profile jihadi brides, centered on pan-African philosophical approaches to media and society in the context of peace journalism (journalism for peacebuilding) and gender, argues for the salience of appreciating the reciprocal nature of media and society (that media influences society and vice-versa) in peace and security discourses regarding preventive approaches to female violent extremism. Sensational media reporting of violent extremism negatively influences society. Media occupies a central position in discourses of peace and security and ought to influence society in a proactive fashion, rather than a reactive one.

As a societal gatekeeper and the "fourth estate," the media can use its position to influence the shape and form of counterterrorism. On female violent extremism, this calls for more comprehensive gender approaches to media representation that dovetail with Kenya's strategic gender approach to

counterterrorism. Media organizations need to conduct more research and analysis on extremism as they report, to give the public a better understanding on how it is evolving, not just sensationalizing it. Therefore, a strategic approach to counterterrorism in Kenya needs to explicitly speak to the role of the media to avoid a sensationally reactive press when reporting cases of jihadi brides. If the media is sensitized to issues of female violent extremism, then it can be more analytical by present women as active players (not just victims) and at the same time, preventers and dissuaders for strategic prevention by deeply exploring what motivates jihadi bridism. Constructing effective media and government responses to female violent extremism requires better media representations through a deeper understanding of the backgrounds and demographics of the women who became jihadi brides.

Drivers of Radicalization

Gender Subordination of Women in Kenya's Political-Economy

In a study on radicalization in Kenya, 87 percent of respondents cited religion as their reason for joining al-Shabaab, emphasizing the influence of religion in radicalization.¹³ However, ideology alone is not sufficient in capturing the heterogeneous variables at play, which include issues such as culture, marginalization, and the state's relations with Muslim youths of Somali descent. Relations between the police and people of Somali descent in Kenya have always been characterized by suspicion, which has been worsened by the entry of concerns about terrorism into the country's peace and security discourse. Somalis are perceived to be the key suspects in instances of terrorism, which has led to a tendency towards "collective punishment" by the state and human rights abuses in the name of counterterrorism.¹⁴ Women are the worst affected by these heavy-handed state responses and human rights abuses due to widespread gender subordination of women in Kenya's political-economy in general.¹⁵ Kenya's development process has been characterized by a prevailing culture of patriarchy, with a lack of capacity-building and sensitization of women. Therefore, women have become vulnerable to those who successfully exploit such vulnerabilities to trade extremist ideas in exchange for loyalty premised on romanticized material promises and anchored on a return to illusive core religious and moral values, social justice, and good governance.¹⁶

Interestingly, the jihadi brides in the stories analyzed did not tally with the obvious assumptions about how marginalization interplays with violent extremism. For instance, it is important to underscore the fact that the jihadi women profiled were young (between the ages of 19 and 21), came from middle class urban families, were predominantly Muslim, and were typically well-educated. Some of these women are university students, which should adjust our understanding of the drivers of violent extremism to include more than just lack of education and poverty. The most worrying trend in virtually all these incidents is that the women involved are Muslims of Somali descent, underscoring the salience of ideology (religion and politics) in female violent extremism.

This outcome of profiling creates an analytical burden for a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of female violent extremism. The fact that the women were generally from a middle class urban background and were, on average, well-educated echoes the dilemma facing linear profiling in female violent extremism. Nevertheless, the narrative of a better life common in jihadi bridism captures how extremists exploit the political and economic effects of marginalization through marriage and other person-to-person relationships to embed themselves within local society. An example of this occurred in Kenya in 1994 when the leader of al-Qaeda's East African cell, Fazull Abdulla Mohammed, set up base with three other foreign terror suspects who were all married to local Swahili women.¹⁷

Marriage and Family Ties

When the U.S. embassy in Nairobi and an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa were attacked by al-Qaeda in 1998 and 2002 respectively, suspicion centered on a small group of Muslims in Mombasa, where terror suspects had established themselves.¹⁸ American and Kenyan investigators confirmed connections between at least one active al-Qaeda cell and a small group of Kenyans through marriage, family, and Islamic school in the 1998 bombings. Through jihadi bridism, it is now emerging that marriage is one of the key ways women are involved in some of the deadliest terrorism in the world.¹⁹ It is important to investigate if the three women involved in the recent attack on a Mombasa police station (which took place on the 15th anniversary of the September 11 attacks in the United States) could be linked to jihadi bridism. If that link is positively established, then it could be true that marriage is now being used by young women to gain entry into the frontline of al-Shabaab terrorism.

Government and Media Response

The Government

The government has integrated terrorism into the criminal justice system and established the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (NCTS), which is enforced by a number of agencies including the Antiterrorism Police Unit, National Intelligence Service, Rapid Response Squad, and Kenya Defence Forces. More, however, needs to be done to make the strategy human rights and gender-compliant. The NCTS is elitist in terms of membership, follows a top-down approach to security, and does not have a specific comprehensive gender strategy. The NCTS's involvement of Muslim women's groups is a good idea but not sufficient. It risks mistaking the scope of what would be termed "gendered lenses" to mean only targeting women, excluding men (who are equally important) and limiting the range of gendered interventions that could be applied at the policy level. At the same time, it could lock out other important stakeholders dealing with peace and security in general, such as researchers in local universities, local community leaders, and the media.

The Media

Media organizations have portrayed women as victims of terrorism, obscuring other roles they can play in counterterrorism. The role of the media needs to evolve and that evolution need to be guided by a new conceptual framework that emphasizes the need for peace and security in Africa reflected through gender and peace sensitive sourcing to frame terrorism stories. One philosophical conceptualization that can guide a better utilization of sources for peace and security is Hybrid Peace Journalism (HPJ). HPJ, an idea borrowed from Peace Journalism (journalism designed to solve conflict for peacebuilding), is anchored on the ideas of unity (*Umoja*), national cohesion (*Harambee*), and humanity (*Utu*) as news values.²⁰ A prime example of this approach was the *Daily Nation* act of quoting an official source appealing for unity and togetherness after the recent Mombasa attack involving three women:

*I appeal to the community [Ujamaa], leadership and everybody [men and women], let's remain together [Harambee]. To every one of us I say protect your life but also be your brother's keeper [Utu/Ubuntu]... Let this incident help us emerge even stronger as a community [Umoja]*²¹

Sources are important in news construction, so journalists should choose them carefully in order to frame terrorism in a manner not likely to cause fear and instability. Unfortunately, the sources generally utilized in stories about jihadi brides were mainly government officials who helped construct a news frame centered

on preventive action (law enforcement) at the expense of strategic prevention, making audiences little wiser on the role of women in counterterrorism.

Policy Options and Recommendations

The Kenyan government can invest in research and intelligence in order to better understand and analyze the evolving role of women and terrorism in Kenya. It can work with stakeholders to incorporate a more comprehensive gendered component in the National Counter-terrorism Strategy, beyond just working with Muslim women groups. And finally it can engage moderate Muslim theologians to empower, support, and elevate their voices in countering violent extremism.

The international counterterrorism community, meanwhile, can do more to account for the complex nature of gender issues within violent extremism and work with the Kenyan government to address them. The “sisters without borders” program of Kenyan civil society organizations, organized by the State Department and funded by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), is a good model. Programs like that can be used to engage mothers whose daughters are married to al-Shabaab militants. Mothers are the strongest link for sourcing intelligence and building community resilience in the absence of men and they need government support to play this important role.²²

The African Union’s African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism could partner with selected research centers in local universities to develop a more comprehensive gendered component of CVE, anchored to a training curriculum on pan-African peace journalism. Media organizations could play a similar role by partnering with journalism research centers in local universities to conduct periodic training workshops to sensitize journalists on gender and terrorism reporting, culminating in the development of a media training toolkit. They can also collaborate on designing and instituting curricula on African peace journalism to transform the media industry from within. These local universities can also partner with organizations like USIP to create student community radio stations to promote peace and dialogue.

For a set of policy options related to media, jihadi brides, and female violent extremism in Kenya, see the accompanying Africa Program Policy Brief No. 9 by Fredrick Ogenga.

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